

## 1. Introduction

Poverty reduction has traditionally been the purview of economics, and the field of organizational psychology has not figured prominently in addressing this crucial global issue. This article introduces Humanitarian Work Psychology as a specialized focus within organizational psychology that can contribute to poverty eradication efforts, and in so doing, mark a new departure for psychology. It is the authors' belief that not only *can* organizational psychologists be instrumental in dealing with the challenge of poverty reduction, we have a social obligation to do so.

In this article, we first set the scene by defining a role for organizational psychology in humanitarian development work and poverty reduction, and presenting a brief introduction to organizational psychology and its concerns. We then focus on the specific role Humanitarian Work Psychology can play in international development projects and poverty reduction. We will describe the various ways in which our discipline can, and should, be applied to the development arena, provide some illustrations of the recent Humanitarian Work Psychology work of organizational psychologists, and indicate the importance of encouraging a new generation of Humanitarian Work Psychologists to attend to this vital issue. The establishment of a Global Task Force for Humanitarian Work Psychology is a key step in organizing our efforts moving forward.

**1.1 Background** The level of world poverty is severe and becoming worse with the downturn in the world economy. The statistics are overwhelming and disheartening. Over two billion people live on less than two dollars a day, between 26,000 and 30,000 children die each day as a

result of poverty, and over one-quarter of all children in low-income countries are estimated to be underweight or stunted, with most living in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (Shah, 2008). The poorest 40% of the world's population account for only 5% of global income. The world is well aware of the extent of the plight of poverty and what it will take to reduce it. The first UN Millennium Development Goal (MDG-1) is to reduce extreme poverty and hunger by 50% by 2015. At current trends this goal is unlikely to be achieved.

Kemal Dervis, the then administrator of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) recently stated that "The effects of the current financial crisis could reduce demand for developing countries' exports, as well as the availability of credit and foreign direct investment to finance projects." (Dervis, 2008, p. 1). The economic future of the world looks bleak but even worse for those already suffering from the effects of poverty. Their chances for opportunities to rise above poverty seem more remote than ever.

While we recognize that human welfare and economic growth are in no way synonymous, properly managed economic growth can contribute much to poverty reduction. Expanding economic opportunities for the poor is an important way to ensure that the benefits of economic growth are felt by the poor themselves. It is also the case, but rarely acknowledged, that psychological factors are important in determining the manner in which successful economic change and opportunities are conceived, designed, promoted, instituted and evaluated. Much of the work against poverty takes place in organizations. However, to date, organizational psychology has been largely missing from the battle to eradicate poverty.

### **1.1 Organizational Psychology: A Missing Link**

The development literature contains many examples of good ideas that do not translate well from one context (usually Western, often institutional) to another in a poorer, socially and culturally different region. For example, despite the overall success of micro-credit, the primarily female beneficiaries can face difficulties in achieving work-life balance (Downs, 2007). This is a very personal problem that is difficult to address by macro level policy or intervention, but that can be helped by micro-level understanding of the psychology of work-life balance (Kossek and Lambert, 2005).

Poverty reduction efforts which involve providing aid confront additional psychological complications. Often, the recipients of this aid may have a different interpretation of the motives and intentions held by those who attempt to bring about economic opportunities. This can result in limiting the effectiveness of the intended change, and causing frustration and burnout among those who intended to make a positive contribution. It is too often overlooked that the recipients and the donor benefactors act from differing psychological perspectives based on different experiences, education and world views (Carr, McAuliffe & MacLachlan, 1998). For example, performance management systems that promote self-promotion and individual achievement might clash with traditional systems that stress humility and social achievement, creating strain for workers and moderating performance outcomes (MacLachlan & Carr, 2005).

The science of organizational psychology has available much research and theory to elucidate workplace psychological mediators of socio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-political differences (Easterly, 2006). As Easterly suggests, grand plans like the Millennium Development Goals can backfire unless translated into workable everyday targets for managers and workers in

organizations charged with building capacity and providing poverty reduction services (Locke & Latham, 2002). It has been suggested (Sachs, 2005) that the United Nations' goals generally can be translated into smaller-scale interventions that are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely (or, "S.m.a.r.t"). Organizations are logical venues for smart goal-setting processes (Carr & Bandawe, in press) to increase work motivation (Locke & Latham, 2002). Therefore, in creating opportunities to reduce poverty and enhance well-being, organizational psychology should be a part of the process of developing, instituting and coordinating strategies and actions of both benefactors and recipients. The dissension that sometimes occurs between donors and recipients is also often found *within* organizations of donors and groups of recipients. And, once again, the science of psychology should be applied to successful strategies and activities within these organizations and groups.

## **2. The Field of Organizational Psychology**

The discipline of organizational psychology deals with the research and practice of developing effective organizations of all kinds. This branch of psychology, closely aligned to social psychology, was first conceived by Hugo Munsterberg in 1913 with the publication of "Psychology and Industrial Efficiency" (Munsterberg, 1913). Munsterberg recognized that understanding the world of work required the integration of a large number of subject matters. Therefore, at its beginnings, organizational psychology incorporated research, practice and theory from the older branches of psychology and applied them to the functioning of the business organization. Organizational psychology has since developed its own agenda of research and theory that has provided useful contributions to the theories of other sub-disciplines of psychology. To a great extent today, there are reciprocal influences between other areas of

psychology and us, for example, individual differences (which applies directly to job selection). While most applications of organizational psychology can still be found in business organizations, the discipline's knowledge and perspectives can inform our understanding of human behavior in many other formal, organizational, and institutional settings.

Since organizational psychology encompasses contributions from other disciplines of psychology and from organizational research, it has a unique contribution to make to organizations that work to reduce poverty. For example, organizational psychology utilizes research and tools developed by clinical psychologists so as to have an understanding of personality and emotion and their contribution to successful work performance (Caligiuri, 2006; Cropanzano et al., 1993; Pelled & Xin, 1999). It understands the interaction between physical and mental health and the role of stress on job performance from the research of physiological psychologists (Brief & Weiss, 2002). It uses research on individual differences, psychometrics, learning theory and motivation to develop procedures for the selection of those people who have the greatest potential to perform effectively in different jobs (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998), train them so they can turn their potential into successful performance and implement motivational strategies to promote commitment to their job and organization (Burke & Hutchins, 2007; Kraiger et al., 2004). In addition, organizational psychology has developed theories and strategies to manage the components of work in organizations so as to bring about efficient, effective, sustainable organizations with engaged and productive employees (Sirota et al., 2005). Drawing on this wide range of perspectives on humans and work, we believe that organizational psychology can make valuable contributions to the efforts to achieve many of the MDGs, including our particular concern, MDG-1: to halve extreme poverty and hunger in the world by

2015. The primary reason is that much development work takes place in the context of organizations, groups, and interacting individuals. We consider our approach to constitute a “subset” of organizational psychology, defined as “Humanitarian Work Psychology.”

### **3. International Development Projects**

As an example of points and processes in aid work, where humanitarian work psychology could be applied to international development in general, and to poverty reduction in particular, let us examine some of the work of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP, 2003). The various branches of the UNDP have conducted a number of successful programs in Africa to reduce the level of poverty. One of these is the 1996 Poverty Strategies Initiative to determine the extent of poverty and to determine its constituencies. This involved surveys of households and a quantitative and qualitative assessment of poverty reduction strategies. In Uganda in 1997, the UNDP conducted assessments in 36 rural and urban communities, which resulted in bringing the perspectives of the poor to the planning process. In Ghana, the UNDP supported the establishment of the Centre for Budget Advocacy to train UN employees in Ghana to understand local and national budget formulations (without gender bias) and to promote democratic governance and accountability in programs directed toward poverty reduction (see also, Yiu & Saner, 2005).

UNDP has recognized that the alleviation of poverty requires many alliances, the most important being between the state and civil society. The UN has aided community organizations in Zambia to articulate and prioritize people’s needs and to present them effectively to state agencies. They

helped form coalitions, taught negotiating skills and techniques of conflict resolution, and how to assess and evaluate the effectiveness of poverty alleviation programs.

A further example of the challenges facing an organization like UNDP is the Bamako Call for Action for Research on Health, published in November 2008 ([www.Bamako2008.org](http://www.Bamako2008.org)). This call sees a much broader inter-disciplinary, inter-sector and inter-ministerial interaction as being necessary to improve the health of the poorest of the poor. Thus research and action from civil engineers on sanitation and water supply must meaningfully interface with the clinical work of public health nurses, and with the effective targeting of poor people by micro-finance initiatives. It is this sort of “joined-up” thinking that is now recognized as being critical to helping people escape the poverty trap and providing them with human rights, dignity and opportunities to fully participate in society. Organizational learning (Argyris & Schon, 1996), conflict resolution, community empowerment and ownership, are but a few of the facets of human behavior that will be needed to realize the aspirations articulated in the Bamako Call (Yiu & Saner, 2005).

#### **4. The Role of Humanitarian Work Psychology in Poverty Reduction**

Projects like those described above would benefit from the inclusion of organizational psychologists, focused on humanitarian work psychology, in their activities. The major activities of these projects involve gathering information, analyzing data, synthesizing findings, partnership building, conflict resolution, training, effective communication, measuring, monitoring, assessing, and evaluating. While skills in these activities are not unique to organizational psychologists, the professional training of organizational psychologists emphasizes the psychological and behavioral dimensions of these activities. The particular

credibility of organizational psychologists – as practitioner-scientists – at undertaking such work in the highly competitive for-profit marketplace is clearly established, and can be seen in the training and development programs of major business organizations along with the curriculum of courses in business management such as the Master of Business Administration (MBA) degrees. To promote the input of psychologists to the UN and other agencies, we must make them more aware of the practicality, utility and distinctiveness of our potential contribution. This can only be accomplished if organizational psychologists reach out to such agencies, but this will take an organized and coordinated effort.

While recognizing that many disciplines are involved in poverty reduction, we seek to identify in this section some of the particular contributions that humanitarian work psychology can make. We propose that organizational psychologists can contribute to the UNDP and other poverty reduction organizations in:

- development and establishment of high level mandates,
- policy development,
- operational implementation of programs in the field, and
- internal consultation on personnel and organizational issues

All four of these contributions are interconnected, with policy contributions emerging from interpretation of the psychological implications of the organization's mandate, from lessons learned through program implementation, and from internal organizational procedures for implementing those mandates, policies and field programs. Thus, organizational psychologists



are concerned not just with the development and conduct of individual projects, but with the embedding of effective and lasting behavioral change. They are deeply concerned with increasing the capacity of both individuals and organizations to implement change. This view is consistent with the UN's basic principles of capacity building (United Nations Development Programme, 2008) which include involvement of all stakeholders, the importance of behavioral change, being engaged in the process for the long term, the interdependence of the organizational and individual levels, and the necessity of training. The activities that are required to implement the principles, such as assessing needs and capacity, engaging and partnering with stakeholders (Yiu & Saner, 2005), training, assuring accountability, outcome monitoring and evaluation, are all among the skills that organizational psychologists can bring to partnerships for poverty reduction (Saner & Michalun, 2009).

#### *4.1 Behavioral History*

An investigation of behavioral history in advance of project implementation is essential to evaluating what has been done in the past, what mistakes can be identified and not repeated, and best practices to be applied to future endeavors. Much can be learned about the current psychological state of the recipients which could have a bearing on the potential success of aid programs. For example, a survey of 487 families in rural regions of Beijing, China suggests that impoverished peasants' motivation to be independent and self-sufficient is low. They have little intention to improve their livelihood by acquiring new knowledge and skills (Sun & Ren, 2006). This information is crucial to designing effective intervention programs with such sub-populations, but is not always accessible to aid workers from other disciplines, because it has been limited to publication within the psychology field. A well-executed behavioral history

would not only review the psychology literature, but also communicate the results effectively to policy makers, program managers and field workers.

#### *4.2 Work & Project Engagement*

This entails working collaboratively with field staff and potential program participants and aid recipients to engage participants psychologically in change processes. Such engagement involves giving the recipients decision-making responsibilities and ownership over the project. Organizational psychologists can contribute here by drawing on their long history of work to understand the psychological dimensions of empowerment and decision making, in which emotion and cognition interact in complex ways depending on the individual's own characteristics and their social environment, as well as conditions imposed by the sponsors of the projects in which they are involved (Horvath, 1999).

For projects to be successful and sustainable, a cooperative partnership has to be developed within working groups, within change agent groups, among the working groups and the citizens, and among groups establishing programs and government and governmental agencies in the host country. In developing workshops for the participants to identify common problems, common goals and agreed-upon procedures to move toward those goals (including methods for resolving friction between or within groups), organizational psychologists draw on their deep understanding of human cognition (including its limitations) and emotions and the interplay between them (e.g., Chinander & Schweitzer, 2003; Schulz-Hardt, Jochims, & Frey, 2002). One area in which organizational psychologists are particularly valued is their work with groups to set

short- and long-term goals and develop personal capacity as well as plans for achieving goals (Bandura, 1993).

#### *4.3 Psychometric Integrity*

Working collaboratively with field staff and potential, current and past program participants to ensure information collected from all the relevant stakeholders in the project is valid and reliable. Much development work relies on information gathered from household surveys or interviews with program participants. In the best studies, researchers and program managers work to design appropriate questions and remove sources of bias from this process. Organizational psychologists have particular background, knowledge and expertise which can be applied to information gathering in the field (and, these are increasingly being recognized by their colleagues in economics and other disciplines, e.g., Conti & Pudney, 2008). Among the contributions that they can make are the development and testing of questions and question order from the point of view of their cognitive, emotional and information effect on participants and the validity and reliability of their responses (Furr & Bacharach, 2008).

#### *4.4 Change Management Evaluation*

Systematically reviewing, assessing, monitoring and revising the entire implementation process will be necessary for the ultimate long-term success and sustainability of the project. Key elements here are the achievement of the original plan as well as the identification of any unintended consequences, and addressing these appropriately.

### **5. Humanitarian Work Psychology in Poverty Reduction: Some Examples**

The relatively few organizational psychologists who have been working in the field of poverty reduction can claim some success, in particular in the areas of management of aid organizations and their staffs (expatriate issues, local issues, volunteers, etc.) and program effectiveness (capacity building, recipients of aid, local participants in poverty reduction programs, etc.).

### *5.1 Management of Aid Organizations and their Staffs*

Organizational psychologists can play an important role in advising on selection and placement of volunteers. Volunteers who are resilient and psychologically competent to handle adverse conditions can be deployed to the field while those who have other strengths should be encouraged to make their contributions in their home countries. A team of organizational psychologists is currently developing a valid selection instrument in the wake of the earthquake that killed 87,000 Chinese in 2008 (Schings, 2008). The goal is to have an easy-to-use questionnaire that can quickly screen people who want to volunteer when a disaster occurs. This will substantially reduce the personnel work that could overwhelm many relief agencies shortly after a disaster. It will also allow relief agencies to select and train volunteers during “peaceful times” in preparation for future disasters.

Psychological theories can be applied for the management of volunteers (e.g., Taylor et al., 2006). Organizational psychologists’ skills in measuring job satisfaction have been applied to the construction of a “volunteer satisfaction index” (Galindo-Kuhn and Guzley, 2001). Having been validated on a volunteer sample in an NGO, the volunteer satisfaction index has the potential of being applied for the study and improvement of job satisfaction among poverty-reduction volunteers in many parts of the world. Another example of volunteer management is Musa and

Hamid's (2008) study of burnout, job satisfaction, stress and distress among aid workers in Darfur.

Hutchings (2002) found that Australian firms operating in China pay attention to psychological factors when selecting expatriate workers, but do not follow up systematically once these people are in the field. Ehrenreich and Elliott's (2004) study of humanitarian aid organizations found that few of them screen field staff to identify those who may have adverse responses to stress, nor do they train field workers in stress management. There was little awareness of how process and work design can help to reduce stress, and these organizations did little to help the field workers prepare psychologically for the return home. Jackson et al (2008) found that in many cases, field workers employed by foreign aid organizations may be their organization's only representative in a country or a remote location; such workers tend to be individualists, a benefit to the worker but potentially also a threat to organizational cohesion and to the application and enforcement of organizational policies such as policies on not giving bribes.

In recognition of socio-cultural and socio-economic factors in pay diversity between expatriate and local workers in international development work, the UK's Economic and Social Research Council/Department for International Development is currently funding a multi-institutional, multi-sector research project, "ADDUP" (Are Development Discrepancies Undermining Performance? (<http://poverty.massey.ac.nz/#addup>)). ADDUP will (a) document the extent of pay diversity in international projects and (b) assess its various impacts on aid and commercial workers' performance (Carr, 2007).

## *5.2 Program Effectiveness*

Renner (2007) reports on his experiences in coaching managers in underdeveloped nations, both African and Asian. These managers included government representatives who controlled millions of dollars of foreign aid, as well as managers of small businesses who were providing employment and growing the local economy.

Humanitarian work psychology has also been applied to action planning in an entrepreneurial setting and the relationship between elaborate and proactive planning and business success (Frese et al, 2008). The underlying proposition is that one requirement for effective goal-directed action is the existence of well-developed plans. The authors found that such planning can be coached and trained: owners can be taught to plan for long-term opportunities and threats and to develop appropriate plans and back-up plans. The implications for successful long-term development work are substantial.

## **6. Looking to the Future**

Our objective going forward is to increase the application of humanitarian work psychology to poverty reduction – to turn the focus toward “what might – or could – be” and how to get there. There are some obstacles as we move forward. One challenge that organizational psychologists face as they attempt to inform others concerned about poverty reduction of the knowledge, skills and perspectives they can bring to the field is a perception that their branch of psychology is perceived as a Western concern, at worst an arm of large corporations that are not concerned with the welfare and well-being of the people of less developed nations.

Another challenge is reflected in a recent review of the past 45 years of organizational psychological research, which suggests that “the field of [organizational] psychology is not

likely to become more visible or more relevant to society at large ... unless researchers, practitioners, universities, and professional organizations implement significant changes” (Cascio & Aguinis, 2008, p. 1074, parenthesis added). One of these changes is a shift from an academic focus to applied settings: “If the published research is seen as relevant and useful, then there is a higher likelihood that practitioners will read it and that the research findings will affect their practices” (ibid).

Even with such an emphasis on applications of humanitarian work psychology to poverty reduction, the possible benefits of organizational psychological input can only be realized if the UN and other poverty reduction organizations become aware of its potential. The distinctive contribution of organizational psychology is its capacity for integrating into a coherent whole, and on a scientific basis, the disparate elements involved in the psychological understanding of organizations (selection, development, strategy, evaluation), as well as the ability to weigh, triangulate, and test out evidence, both quantitative and qualitative. Awareness of the potential of organizational psychology can only be established if organizational psychologists reach out to those involved in poverty reduction efforts and engage in a well-orchestrated and coordinated effort to raise their consciousness about, and stimulate their appetite for, the many and varied contributions that organizational psychology can make to achieving the objective of eradicating the scourge of extreme poverty.

One recent attempt to create greater and more focused involvement in poverty reduction among organizational psychologists is the establishment of a Global Task Force in this area, described initially by Reichman et al., (2008). This has recently evolved into a *Global Task Force on*

*Humanitarian Work Psychology*, with expanded representation and specific goals and projects. This Task Force is a non-partisan, international initiative formed to link organizational psychology and its institutions with development agencies, the UN, the OECD, civil society and low-income country governments which “aims to bring together and focus a range of psychological initiatives, energies and value commitments” (Global Task Force, 2008, p. 4) and to make those available to a range of development agencies. The group seeks to step up the scale, impact and funding of activities such as those described in this paper, and to do so in an integrated fashion. Its hope is to align humanitarian work psychology initiatives for poverty reduction and to harmonize them with efforts towards realizing the Millennium Development Goals (Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, 2005; Carr et al., 2008). As a professional group, we stand ready for a new era of interdisciplinary collaboration and practical application of our expertise (MacLachlan et al., 2008).

Among the specific applications of humanitarian work psychology to poverty reduction efforts, members of the Task Force are initiating and participating in projects such as the following:

1. Continuing the research of “ADDUP” (Are Development Discrepancies Undermining Performance) regarding the implications of pay diversity in international projects;
2. Studying leadership in humanitarian organizations and the specific leadership characteristics required for successful operations both at headquarters and in the field;
3. With a major international NGO, assisting in the implementation of an internal “merger” of multiple country-level projects and project teams, resulting in harmonized delivery of services with attendant economies of scale and greatly improved efficiency and effectiveness;



4. Developing and implementing an online training system to prepare volunteers for fieldwork, and to provide virtual mentoring and support on an ongoing basis for those in the field;
5. Investigating the impact of perceived fairness in complex cross-national organizational settings – organizational justice as a determinant of human behavior;
6. Outreach activities designed to broaden awareness of the potential contributions of organizational psychology, both at the practitioner level and among students – to encourage the development of future generations of humanitarian work psychologists.

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